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Golden Age

The term **Golden Age** comes from Greek mythology, particularly the *Works and Days* of Hesiod, and is part of the description of temporal decline of the state of peoples through five *Ages*, *Gold* being the first and the one during which the Golden Race of humanity (Greek: χρόνος γένος)^[1] lived. Those living in the first Age were ruled by *Kronos*, after the finish of the first age was the *Silver*, then the *Bronze*, after this the *Heroic* age, with the fifth and current age being *Iron*.^[2]

By extension "Golden Age" denotes a period of primordial peace, harmony, stability, and prosperity. During this age peace and harmony prevailed, people did not have to work to feed themselves, for the earth provided food in abundance. They lived to a very old age with a youthful appearance, eventually dying peacefully, with spirits living on as "guardians". Plato in *Cratylus* (397 e) recounts the golden race of humans who came first. He clarifies that Hesiod did not mean literally made of gold, but good and noble.

In classical Greek mythology the Golden Age was presided over by the leading Titan *Cronus*.^[3] In some version of the myth *Astraea* also ruled. She lived with men until the end of the Silver Age, but in the Bronze Age, when men became violent and greedy, fled to the stars, where she appears as the constellation *Virgo*, holding the scales of Justice, or *Libra*.^[4]

European pastoral literary tradition often depicted nymphs and shepherds as living a life of rustic innocence and peace, set in Arcadia, a region of Greece that was the abode and center of worship of their tutelary deity, goat-footed *Pan*, who dwelt among them.^[5]



The Golden Age by Pietro da Cortona (Palazzo Pitti, Florence, Italy).

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The Golden Age in Europe: Greece

The earliest attested reference to the European myth of the *Ages of Man* 500 BCE–350 BCE appears in the late 6th century BCE works of the Greek poet Hesiod's *Works and Days* (109–126). Hesiod, a deteriorationist, identifies the Golden Age, the *Silver Age*, the *Bronze Age*, the *Heroic Age*, and the *Iron Age*. With the exception of the Heroic Age, each succeeding age was worse than the one that went before. Hesiod maintains that during the Golden Age, before the invention of the arts, the earth produced food in such abundance that there was no need for agriculture:

[Men] lived like gods without sorrow of heart, remote and free from toil and grief: miserable age rested not on them; but with legs and arms never failing they made merry with feasting beyond the reach of all devils. When they died, it was as though they were overcome with sleep, and they had all good things; for the fruitful earth unforced bare them fruit abundantly and without stint. They dwelt in ease and peace.

Plato in his *Cratylus* referred to an age of golden men and also expounded at some length on Ages of Man from Hesiod's *Works and Days*. The Roman poet Ovid simplified the concept by reducing the number of Ages to four: Gold, Bronze, Silver, and Iron. Ovid's poetry, known to schoolboys from Antiquity through the Middle Ages and beyond, was likely a prime source for the transmission of the myth of the Golden Age during the period when Western Europe had lost direct contact with Greek literature.

In Hesiod's version, the Golden Age ended when the Titan *Prometheus* conferred on mankind the gift of fire and all the other arts. For this, Zeus punished Prometheus by chaining him to a rock in the Caucasus, where an eagle eternally ate at his liver. The gods sent the beautiful maiden *Pandora* to Prometheus's brother *Epimetheus*. The gods had entrusted Pandora with a box that she was forbidden to open; however, her uncontrollable curiosity got the better of her and she opened the box, thereby unleashing all manner of evil into the world.

The *Orphic school*, a mystery cult that originated in Thrace and spread to Greece in the 5th century BCE, held similar beliefs about the early days of man, likewise denominating the ages with metals. In common with the many other mystery cults prevalent in the Graeco-Roman world (and their Indo-European religious antecedents),

the world view of Orphism was cyclical. Initiation into its secret rites, together with ascetic practices, was supposed to guarantee the individual's soul eventual release from the grievous circle of mortality and also communion with god(s). Orphics sometimes identified the Golden Age with the era of the god Phanes, who was regent over the Olympus before Cronus. In classical mythology however, the Golden Age was associated with the reign of Saturn. In the 5th century BCE, the philosopher Empedocles, like Hesiod before him, emphasized the idea of primordial innocence and harmony in all of nature, including human society, from which he maintained there had been a steady deterioration until the present.



The Golden Age by Lucas Cranach the Elder.

Arcadia

A tradition arose in Greece that the site of the original Golden Age had been Arcadia, an impoverished rural area of Greece where the herdsmen still lived on acorns and where the goat-footed god Pan had his home among the poplars on Mount Maenalus. However, in the 3rd century BCE, the Greek poet, Theocritus, writing in Alexandria, set his pastoral poetry in on the lushly fertile island of Sicily, where he had been born. The protagonist of Theocritus's first Idyll, the goat herder, Daphnis, is taught to play the Syrinx (panpipes) by Pan himself.

The Golden Age in Rome: Virgil and Ovid

Writing in Latin during the turbulent period of revolutionary change at the end of the Roman Republic (roughly between 44 and 38 BCE), the poet Virgil moved the setting for his pastoral imitations of Theocritus back to an idealized Arcadia in Greece, thus initiating a rich and resonant tradition in subsequent European literature.

Virgil, moreover, introduced into his poetry the element of political allegory, which had been largely absent in Theocritus, even intimating in his fourth Eclogue that a new Golden Age of peace and justice was about to return:

*Ultima Cumaei venit iam carminis aetas;
magnus ab integro saeclorum nascitur ordo:
iam redit et Virgo, redeunt Saturnia regna;
iam nova progenies caelo demittitur alto.*

Translation:

*Now the last age by Cumae's Sibyl sung
Has come and gone, and the majestic roll
Of circling centuries begins anew:
Astraea returns,
Returns old Saturn's reign,
With a new breed of men sent down from heaven.^[6]*

Somewhat later, shortly before he wrote his epic poem the Aeneid, which dealt with the establishment of Roman Imperial rule, Virgil composed his Georgics (29 BCE), modeled directly on Hesiod's Works and Days and similar Greek works. Ostensibly about agriculture, the Georgics are in fact a complex allegory about how man's alterations of nature (through works) are related to good and bad government. Although Virgil does not mention the Golden Age by name in the Georgics, he does refer in them to a time of primitive communism before the reign of Jupiter, when:

*Fields knew no taming hand of husbandmen
To mark the plain or mete with boundary-line.
Even this was impious; for the common stock
They gathered, and the earth of her own will
All things more freely, no man bidding, bore.*

*ante Iouem nulli subigebant arua coloni
ne signare quidem aut partiri limite campum
fas erat; in medium quaerebant, ipsaque tellus
omnia liberius nullo poscente ferebat. (Georgics, Book 1: 125–28 (<http://www.theoi.com/Text/VirgilGeorgics1.html#11>))*

This view, which identifies a State of Nature with the celestial harmony of which man's nature is (or should be, if properly regulated) a microcosm, reflects the Hellenistic cosmology that prevailed among literate classes of Virgil's era. It is seen again in Ovid's Metamorphoses (7 CE), in which the lost Golden Age is depicted as a place and time when, because nature and reason were harmoniously aligned, men were naturally good:

*The Golden Age was first; when Man, yet new,
No rule but uncorrupted Reason knew:
And, with a native bent, did good pursue.
Unforc'd by punishment, un-aw'd by fear.
His words were simple, and his soul sincere;
Needless was written law, where none opprest:
The law of Man was written in his breast.^[7]*

The Graeco-Roman concept of the "natural man" delineated by Ovid and many other classical writers, was especially popular during the Deistically inclined 18th century. It



Sculpture of Pan teaching Daphnis to play the pipes; c. 100 BCE Found in Pompeii.

is often erroneously attributed to Rousseau, who did not share it.^[8]

"Soft" and "hard" primitivism in Arcadia

In his famous essay, "Et in Arcadia ego: Poussin and the Elegiac Tradition",^[9] Erwin Panofsky remarks how in ancient times, "that particular not overly opulent, region of central Greece, Arcady, came to be universally accepted as an ideal realm of perfect bliss and beauty, a dream incarnate of ineffable happiness, surrounded nevertheless with a halo of 'sweetly sad' melancholy":

There had been, from the beginning of classical speculation, two contrasting opinions about the natural state of man, each of them, of course, a "Gegen-Konstruktion" to the conditions under which it was formed. One view, termed "soft" primitivism in an illuminating book by Lovejoy and Boas^[10] conceives of primitive life as a golden age of plenty, innocence, and happiness—in other words, as civilized life purged of its vices. The other, "hard" form of primitivism conceives of primitive life as an almost subhuman existence full of terrible hardships and devoid of all comforts—in other words, as civilized life stripped of its virtues.

Arcady, as we encounter it in all modern literature, and as we refer to it in our daily speech, falls under the heading of "soft" or golden-age primitivism. To be sure, this real Arcady was the domain of Pan, who could be heard playing the syrinx on Mount Maenalus; and its inhabitants were famous for their musical accomplishments as well as for their ancient lineage, rugged virtue, and rustic hospitality.

Other Golden Ages

There are analogous concepts in the religious and philosophical traditions of the South Asian subcontinent. For example, the Vedic or ancient Hindu culture saw history as cyclical, composed of yugas with alternating Dark and Golden Ages. The Kali yuga (Iron Age), Dwapara yuga (Bronze Age), Treta yuga (Silver Age) and Satya yuga (Golden Age) correspond to the four Greek ages. Similar beliefs occur in the ancient Middle East and throughout the ancient world, as well.^[11]

Hindu

The Indian teachings differentiate the four world ages (Yugas) not according to metals, but according to quality with Truth being the defining feature of the Golden Age. After the world fall at the end of the fourth, worst age (the Kali yuga) named after the Messianic figure Kali, the cycle should be continued, eventually culminating in a new golden age.

The Krita Yuga also known as the Satya yuga, the First and Perfect Age, as described in the Mahabharata, a Hindu epic:

Men neither bought nor sold; there were no poor and no rich; there was no need to labour, because all that men required was obtained by the power of will; the chief virtue was the abandonment of all worldly desires. The *Krita Yuga* was without disease; there was no lessening with the years; there was no hatred or vanity, or evil thought whatsoever; no sorrow, no fear. All mankind could attain to supreme blessedness.

Satya Yuga lasts for 1,728,000 years, Treta Yuga 1,296,000 years, Dvapara Yuga 864,000 years and Kali Yuga 432,000 years. According to the Puranas there are 71 such cycles in a life of Manu whose life duration is 306.72 million years. The reign of fourteen Manus (4.32 billion years) comprises one day (Kalpa) of Brahma.^[12] Knowledge, meditation, and communion with Spirit hold special importance in this era. The average life expectancy of a human being in Satya Yuga is believed to be about 100,000 years. That duration of life declines in next age, Treta Yuga to 10,000 years, followed by Dvapara Yuga 1 000 years and Kali Yuga up to 100 years. During Satya Yuga, most people engage only in good, sublime deeds and mankind lives in harmony with the earth. Ashrams become devoid of wickedness and deceit. Natyam (such as Bharatanatyam), according to Natya Shastra, did not exist in the Satya Yuga "because it was the time when all people were happy".

Brahma Kumaris

The Brahma Kumaris and Prajapita Brahma Kumaris make reference to five yuga in a single cycle of 5,000 years in which the Golden Age, or Satya yuga, is the first and lasts for 1,250 years. Three of the remaining four; Thretha Yuga (Silver Age), Dwarpar Yuga (Copper Age) and Kali Yuga (Iron Age), also last for 1,250 years each. The fifth age, Sangam Yuga (Confluence Age), is given to the last 100 years of the fourth age and represents the period when the Iron Age is destroyed and the next Golden Age is created.^[13] The World Drama is the story of the rise and fall of human souls during their sojourn in this world. It is about the interplay of souls, matter and God, and of the different stages through which human souls pass in five different epochs or acts of this drama. The drama begins with the Golden Age, when every soul expresses its original qualities of purity, peace, love and truth, and human relationships are marked by complete harmony. The virtuous nature of these divine beings is mirrored by nature, which is in its pristine state and serves humans with abundance. This is the time remembered as heaven or paradise by humanity.

Golden age is the time when the human beings are full of all the divine virtues and have all the seven qualities peace, purity, love, wisdom, happiness, power and bliss to the fullest. And henceforth they are called deities, that we remember them as were our ancestors and whose divinity is worshiped in Hindu temples. The silver age comes after golden age where as time goes by, the souls, who are the actors in this drama, undergo a gradual decline. By Act Two, the number of souls has increased significantly, and though all are still happy and prosperous, the radiance and fullness that characterized their lives is no more.^[14]

Rajayoga Mediation taught at the Brahma Kumaris are the way to revive the seven qualities within and awaken self true divinity, the souls of Satyuga AKA Golden Age has.

Meditation energizes your awareness, bringing both peace and wisdom to a busy mind. It expands one's capacity to love, and heals broken hearts. It also dissolves many fears, replacing them with lightness and freedom from anxiety.

But perhaps the greatest gift that meditation brings is the glow of inner peace that is both gentle and strong.

Practice of Rajyoga meditation or intellectual communion with God brings into the soul many powers. Of these, eight are important. The Eight Powers. (<http://www.brahmakumaris.com/rajyoga-meditation/benefits-of-meditation/>)^[14]

Norse

The Old Norse word *gullaldr* (literally "Golden Age") was used in *Völspar* to describe the period after *Ragnarök*, where the surviving gods and their progeny build the city *Gimlé* on the ruins of *Asgard*. In this period, *Baldr* reigns.

Bible

There is a reference to a succession of kingdoms in *Nebuchadnezzar's dream* in *Daniel 2*, in decreasing order identified as gold, silver, bronze, iron and finally mixed iron and clay.

31 "Your Majesty looked, and there before you stood a large statue – an enormous, dazzling statue, awesome in appearance. 32 The head of the statue was made of pure gold, its chest and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze, 33 its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of baked clay. 34 While you were watching, a rock was cut out, but not by human hands. It struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay and smashed them. 35 Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver and the gold were all broken to pieces and became like chaff on a threshing floor in the summer. The wind swept them away without leaving a trace. But the rock that struck the statue became a huge mountain and filled the whole earth."^[15]

— Daniel 2: 31-35

The interpretation of the dream follows in verses 36–45.

Fantasy

In modern fantasy worlds, whose background and setting sometimes draw heavily on real-world myths, similar or compatible concepts of a Golden Age exist in the said world's prehistory; when deities or elf-like creatures existed, before the coming of humans.

For example, in *The Silmarillion* by J. R. R. Tolkien, a Golden Age exists in Middle-earth legendarium. Arda (the part of the world where *The Lord of the Rings* is set), was designed to be symmetrical and perfect. After the wars of the Gods, Arda lost its perfect shape (known as *Arda Unmarred*) and was called *Arda Marred*. Another kind of 'Golden Age' follows later, after the Elves awoke; the *Eldar* stay on *Valinor*, live with the *Valar* and advance in arts and knowledge, until the rebellion and the fall of the *Noldor*, reminiscent of the Fall of Man. Eventually, after the end of the world, the *Silmarilli* will be recovered and the light of the *Two Trees of Valinor* rekindled. Arda will be remade again as *Arda Healed*.

In *The Wheel of Time* universe, the "Age of Legends" is the name given to the previous Age: In this society, channelers were common and *Aes Sedai* – trained channelers – were extremely powerful, able to make *angreal*, *sa'angreal*, and *ter'angreal*, and holding important civic positions. The Age of Legends is seen as a utopian society without war or crime, and devoted to culture and learning. *Aes Sedai* were frequently devoted to academic endeavours, one of which inadvertently resulted in a hole – The Bore – being drilled in the Dark One's prison. The immediate effects were not realised, but the Dark One gradually asserted power over humanity, swaying many to become his followers. This resulted in the War of Power and eventually the Breaking of the World.

Another example is in the background of the *Lands of Lore* classic computer game, where the history of the Lands is divided in Ages. One of them is also called the Golden Age, a time when the Lands were ruled by the 'Ancients', and there were no wars. This age ended with the 'War of the Heretics'.

The Golden Age may also refer to a state of early childhood. Herbert Spencer argued that young children progress through the cognitive stages of evolution of the human species and of human civilization, thereby linking pre-civilization and infancy.^[16] Kenneth Grahame called his evocation of early childhood 'The Golden Age'^[17] and J. M. Barrie's fictional character Peter Pan, who first appeared in '*The Little White Bird*'^[18] was named after *Pan*, a Greek god from the Golden Age. Barrie's further works about Peter Pan^{[19][20]} depict early childhood as a time of pre-civilised naturalness and happiness, which is destroyed by the subsequent process of education.^[21]

Present-day usage

The term "Golden Age" is at present frequently used in the context of various fields, such as the "Spanish Golden Age", "Dutch Golden Age", "Golden age of alpinism", "Golden Age of American animation", "Golden Age of Comics", "Golden Age of Science Fiction", "Golden Age of Television", "Golden Age of Hollywood", "Golden age of arcade video games", "Golden Age of Radio", "Golden Age of Hip Hop" and even "Golden Age of Piracy" or "Golden Age of Porn". Usually, the term "Golden Age" is bestowed retroactively, when the period in question has ended and is compared with what followed in the specific field discussed.

See also

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 2012 phenomenon ▪ Ages of Man ▪ Arcadia (utopia) ▪ Eschatology ▪ Garden of Eden ▪ Golden Liberty (in Polish history) ▪ Great year ▪ Merrie England 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Messianic Age ▪ Millennialism ▪ Original affluent society ▪ Paradise ▪ Precession of the Equinoxes ▪ Satya Yuga/Krita Yuga ▪ Utopia
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External links

- The Age of Man (<http://www.maicar.com/GML/AgesOfMan.html#golden>)
- Five Ages of Man in Greek Mythology (<http://ancienthistory.about.com/cs/grecoromanmyth1/a/hesiodagesofman.htm>)
- What Makes a Scientific Golden Age? (https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-94-011-6456-6_28#page-2) - by Joseph Agassi

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